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THE LOTUS MAGAZINE

THE DEATH OF A YOUNG SCHOLAR AND BOOK COLLECTOR

By Gustav Kobbé



THE Titanic's dead included a young American who, in spite of his being but a few years out of the university, already had displayed a taste and scholarship in the collecting of rare books that had attracted attention here and in Europe. Harry Elkins Widener, who with his brave father, George D. Widener, went down on the Titanic, was still a student at Harvard when he laid the foundation of his book collection. At that time Ernest Dressel North, through whom young Widener afterwards secured a number of rarities, heard that members of the Widener family were anxious to buy a first folio Shakespeare for the young scion of the house who was showing such a deep interest in books and book collecting. None of the New York dealers, however, were able to find a first folio and eventually the Wideners

purchased the Locker-Lamson copy at the Van Antwerp sale in London.

Mention is made of this incident, because Harry Elkins Widener's parents and his grandfather, P. A. B. Widener, took interest and pride in his taste for and knowledge of rare books and on more than one occasion showed their interest in a like practical way. Their birthday and Christmas presents to him were apt to take shape in appropriations to enable him to secure additions to his library. "I'd like that," he would sometimes say to a dealer, as he put down a book he had been examining; "but I can't afford it now. But if you don't mind waiting till Christmas, I'll be able to buy it then."

And any dealer who knew him would unhesitatingly put aside the item for him. The dealers admired him because he was not merely the son and grandson of men of great wealth trying to cut a dash as a book collector, but because while, as a matter of fact he had, comparatively speaking, little money to spend, he spent it with unerring judgment. Yet no man more modest than he entered their shops and both here and in England he was greatly beloved for his frank, open manner and the total absence of haggling in his method of buying. He either bought at the price offered or not at all.

Books from several collections formed the nucleus of his library. There could be no better provenance than that of his copy of the first folio. A number of his books came from the library of Clarence S. Bement, who was a large buyer at the Augustin Daly sale; and who, when he formed his connection with the Rosenbach Company, put his library into the concern.

When George C. Thomas died and his books were sold, many of them also went into the Widener library. The Widener first edition of the "Eikon Basilikæ" has both the Thomas and the Bement provenance and goes back of that through the Earl of Orford and Joseph Marryat to Daniel. Mr. Widener also was a buyer at the first and second Hoe sales and probably was hurrying here on the Titanic hoping to be in time to attend some of the sessions of the third. Those were by no means few who thought that young Widener with his great love and knowledge of books would become as great a collector as the man, the dispersal of whose library has almost made an era in the history of book sales. Even when he was on here for the Hoe sales, his love of books took him to the shops. Between sessions of last spring's sale he strolled into North's place and bought what is known as the "Lamb" copy of the Kilmarnock Burns, with the original wrappers and in perfect original condition throughout. It had been bought in Glasgow in February, 1898, by Sabin for about \$2,610. There are only two other copies known in as fine condition as that in the Widener library.

Mr. Widener was greatly interested in English literature and many of the items in this department of his library are "association" books. His numerous Dickens first editions probably will all be found to bear autograph presentation inscriptions from the author to friends. He has some especially fine first editions of Charlotte Brontë, with autograph letters laid in, and probably the best collection of Stevensons in this country.

He made and printed in a limited edition a scholarly catalogue of the most important books in his collection. In this catalogue several books are collated for the first time. Among manuscripts owned by Mr. Widener is an autobiographical fragment by Stevenson. It was written in San Francisco when Stevenson was thirty years old and contains memories of his earliest childhood. The manuscript, in ink, is on twenty-three pages of a note book. Of this fragment Mr. Widener printed forty-five copies, each of which "would bring something more than its weight in gold in the auction rooms," a statement printed in a literary journal two days after Mr. Widener's death, but written before any knowledge of that tragic event had been received.

And speaking of Stevenson, though what was mortal of this young scholar and book lover was not recovered, one somehow likes to think of him and these brave lines of Stevenson together:—

Under the clear and open sky
Dig the grave and let me lie,
Glad did I live and gladly die
And I laid me down with a will.

These be the words ye grave for me:
"Here he lies where he loved to be ;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill."

Dealers speak of young Widener as a "courageous buyer," because when he bought, he bought the best, instead of trying for the second best at a bargain. They must have thought

of this high courage of his, when they read of the manner in which he and his father met their death—rather die than take a place in a lifeboat, so long as a woman remained to be saved.

One can well imagine why people loved and why his family idolized Harry Elkins Widener.

